

Regarding the Inclusion of the Names of the Matriarchs
in the First Blessing of the *Amidah*:
An Overview of the *Teshuvah* by Rabbi Joel Rembaum

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This sermon was included in a two-part series on the opening paragraph of the Amidah, focusing on the history, halakhah and communal impact/import of the inclusion of the matriarchs in that initial blessing. The series was presented at TBA on two Shabbat mornings (June 19 and June 26, 2010) in the Sanctuary and BAIT Tefillah by Rabbis Kliffeld and Leider.

On July 31, 2010 Rabbi Leider presented this part of the series in the Library Minyan.

Prior to this presentation in BAIT Tefillah on June 19, I recommended that congregants read Rabbi Rembaum's teshuvah. (http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/teshuvot/docs/19861990/rembaum_matriarchs.pdf) Those who read the teshuvah prior to reading this sermon may wish to skip reading the first section, "Context of the Question" and the "Overview of the Answer."

This presentation has three components:

1. Context of the Question
2. The Overview of the Response
3. Personal Reflections

The Context of the Question

A *teshuvah* is a rabbinic response to a practical *halakhic* (Jewish legal) question that emerges from a real-life situation. In this case, the "real-life" situation was contextualized in the Library Minyan here at Temple Beth Am. In the late 1980's, the Minyan raised this question to the *Mara d'atra*, Senior Rabbi Joel Rembaum, the ultimate authority who ruled on *halakhic* matters for the congregation: May the Names of the Matriarchs be included in the *Avot* blessing of the *Amidah*? (Please see page 115a and 115b in *Siddur Sim Shalom* for Shabbat and Festivals).

The question was raised because Minyan participants sought a way for the role and the presence of women in Jewish tradition to be reflected in the traditional liturgy. The minyan formed a study group on this topic and compiled a book of sources, sermons and ultimately included Rabbi Rembaum's *teshuvah* as well.

The *Amidah* is one of the central parts of our liturgy. Recited three times a day (and four times on Shabbat and holidays), the *Amidah* replaces the ancient sacrifices of the Israelites in the Temple and is a critical building block of our fixed liturgy.

Overview of the Answer

The inclusion of pages 115a and 115b in the latest edition of *Siddur Sim Shalom* (as well as the brand new edition of the *Mahzor Lev Shalem* for the High Holidays) is a direct result of Rabbi Rembaum's *teshuvah*. This *teshuvah* was passed by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, making available the *halakhic* reasoning and process to all Conservative rabbis who wish to rule in their own congregations on the question of the inclusion of the matriarchs in the *Amidah*.

Rabbi Rembaum makes a strong case for the flexibility of the wording of the *Amidah*. He notes that the various versions of the *Amidah* in the post-Talmudic period support this concept. The Conservative movement's recent addition of the word *ba'olam* in the final blessing of the *Amidah*, hearkening back to a prayerbook from the *Gaonic* period (late 6th century C.E. – mid-11th century C.E.) is another example of such flexibility.

The three primary components of a blessing, *shem*, *malkut* and *inyan* (God's name, God's sovereignty and the topic of the blessing) are required to ensure fulfillment of the obligation associated with a blessing. Based on his reading of the sources, Rabbi Rembaum posits that these three elements are preserved with the addition of the matriarchs in the first blessing of the *Amidah*: The mention of God's name and sovereignty are retained while the topic (our ancestors) of the blessing remains the same. With regard to the addition of the language in the blessing, *ufoked Sarah*, (guardian of Sarah), Rabbi Rembaum cites the Biblical precedence for this language and links the significance of the matriarchs' roles in the Torah and the need for contemporary Jews to hear these matriarchs' names mentioned in this prayer.

Personal Reflections

In BAIT Tefillah, the minyan that I lead at TBA on Shabbat mornings, the *shaliah tzibbur*, the prayer leader, decides which version of the *Amidah* to read out loud. At a recent BAIT Tefillah minyan meeting, the question was raised about whether the minyan should "require" the *shaliah tzibbur* to include the matriarchs. This worthwhile question sparked a conversation between Rabbi Kligfeld and me about this issue. On the basis of the question, we felt it would be helpful for each of us to teach about this issue in our respective Shabbat morning venues and to trade places the following week. In the Library Minyan, it is also customary for the *shaliah tzibbur* to make this choice.

I believe that the inclusion of pages 115a and 115b reflect the pluralism in our movement. It honors the idea that there is more than one right answer in traditional Judaism. It supports that idea, that when it comes to liturgical change, time will tell. Do we know if there will be pages 115a and 115b in a Conservative prayerbook in the year 2050? Just page 115a? Or maybe just page 115b? I don't know – our communities will determine this over time. But for now, the inclusion of faithfully reflects our movement and our interpretation of the tradition.

As a *shaliah tzibbur*, I include the names of the matriarchs. I am grateful that we have this *teshuvah* and I am proud that this question was raised at the synagogue I call home. The inclusion of the matriarchs helps me, and I believe helps other Jews, both men and women, to be reminded of a more inclusive group of tremendous Torah role models.

However, while I choose to include the matriarchs myself, I also do not regard those who choose page 115a as not supportive of women's roles in the synagogue. But there are other times in my spiritual communal life when I do feel this. When I walk into a synagogue and see only a handful of women wearing a head covering and even fewer donning *tallitot*, I feel lonely and bereft of role models for myself. I feel more than a twinge of sadness when a man enters a sanctuary, without a kippah, and someone rushes over to offer him a kippah. Yet, with women, it is optional and I believe this sends a message that women's obligations in the spiritual and ritual realm are not pressing enough. The language of obligation (and the garb of obligation) somehow eludes women despite the fact that in the United States in the 21st century we would never tolerate this in the realms of education or employment.

I ask women who feel uncomfortable at the thought of putting on a kippah and/or a tallit, to allow themselves to be uncomfortable. Just as there are those who are uncomfortable with the inclusion of the matriarchs in the Amidah, there are also those, men and women, for whom it is uncomfortable to see women in ritual garb or if they are women, to don it themselves. I ask that we all make ourselves uncomfortable. If you are a man, please encourage your wives, daughters, sisters and mothers to claim their obligation when they walk into the synagogue. Donning a kippah and a tallit are acts of actualizing the language on page 115b. Let's move beyond the language to living action in our synagogues. Shabbat Shalom.